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A Thai Woman, Her Practice of Traditional Thai Astrology, and Related Gender Issues

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This study presents the personal reflections of a Thai woman on her practice of traditional Thai astrology. It also considers—within the context of a larger discussion about traditional gender roles in Thailand—possible gender specific ways in which an astrologer might read an astrological chart.

Astrology from Europe to Southeast Asia has its roots in ancient Mesopotamia. Thus, in these areas of the world basic similarities exist between descriptions of the Zodiac signs and of the stars. Traditional Thai astrology has its roots in Vedic astrology of India, and both have diverged significantly from Western astrology. Since its introduction into Thai society, Vedic astrology has been adapted to fit both Thai culture and Theravada Buddhism; thus Thai astrology now diverges from Vedic astrology.

Astrology is an important part of Thai spiritual and practical life, and men have traditionally practiced it. Since World War II, however, more and more women have become involved in the practice of Thai astrology.¹

It should be noted that this is not a “how to” introduction to Thai astrology. Nor is it an inquiry into the validity of astrology. The vast majority of Thai astrologers are convinced of the accuracy of predictions drawn from an astrological natal chart. The fact that someone seeks out an astrologer for a reading attests to his or her belief in astrology, although, among the general Thai public, there is quite a wide spectrum of opinions about how much of a reading should be taken fully to heart.²

Thai feminine and masculine genders and the roles associated with them are still “classic” or traditional in structure and expression, although this has changed somewhat in the last twenty years or so, particularly in the Bangkok metropolitan area. Currently, many women hold positions of power and responsibility in fields ranging from medicine and academics to business and politics. However, women are still underrepresented and underpaid in many professions, and they remain the primary caretaker of the home. There is also the classic tradition that insists women should remain virgins until they are married, while it is “natural” for men to have multiple sexual experiences before marriage.³

These classic Thai gender models are maintained in this paper, which uses the categories of “feminine” and “masculine”/ “women” and “men,” because this is how my Thai subjects and respondents categorized themselves in my research. Further, the primary modern manuals for astrological instruction, which are based on Hindu Sanskrit and older Thai manuals, adhere to traditional gender definitions and roles for women and men. Not surprisingly, the principal manual on Thai astrology is written with a male audience in mind, though it does cover both genders in the character descriptions and predictions.

The following discussion is based primarily on oral interviews with Ladaa Gaewkul and information contained in published works. It is understandably limited in scope and universality; nonetheless, it captures the general Thai astrological milieu from a feminine perspective.

Colonel Ladaa Gaewkul, ret. was born in 1944 (2487 Buddhist Era), in the Bangkok area. She was the seventh child in a family of six boys and two girls. Her father was a military officer and she received a top quality education. She speaks fluent English and some French. She started her working career as a teacher, but joined the Thai army in her late twenties at the rank of lieutenant. She served 36 years, making it to the rank of full colonel.

¹ Ronnie Gale Dreyer, *Vedic Astrology: A Guide to the Fundamentals of Jyotish* (Boston, MA: Samuel

² Singtho Suriyarak. *Thai Astrology: Complete Self-Study Book*, n.d.

³For more information, see Willliam J. Klausner, *Thai Culture in Transition: Collected Writings of William J. Klausner* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 2002).

At an early age, she married an officer in the Thai army, but they divorced after a short time, because, as she stated, he was a borderline criminal. She had one son from that marriage, and she never remarried.

As a woman in the masculine world of the Thai army, a single mother, and, later, a woman in the male-dominated profession of astrology, Ladaa⁴ hardly fits the standard Thai gender model of a woman. She is very supportive of women's rights in Thailand and hopes that women can achieve equality. In the area of sexual liberation, she advocates women's control over their own bodies, but she is quite conservative in her opinions on sexual behavior. For example, she roundly criticizes couples that hold hands in public, girls who wear shorts, and, especially, those who dare to show their midriffs (although this is still rare). As she says "it is like they went out and forgot to put on half of their clothes."

Ladaa began reading astrological natal charts after joining the army, where she frequently overheard army officers discussing soldiers' charts before assigning tasks and duties. Over the years, she became very proficient at reading charts, but did not learn the details related to making *and* reading astrological natal charts until shortly after her retirement.⁵ At that time she became the disciple of a male astrologer *Ajarn* (teacher, professor) Sutit, who is, in her opinion, one of the best astrologers in Bangkok. He urged her to become a professional astrologer, and she now has a thriving home-based consulting practice.

Since she has a good pension from the Thai army, Ladaa neither wants nor needs to practice full-time, nor is there a need to charge a high fee. She makes between five and fifteen charts a week and charges 99 baht (about 3 USD), while most astrologers charge between 300-600 baht. Frequently, people will give her quite a bit more than the 99 baht fee, as they are impressed by her diligence in making charts, preparing predictions, and in what they perceive as her accuracy. She also believes that astrologers should use their special skills, in part, as a service to help people, because astrology is not something designed to enrich the astrologer. In 2008, she began to accept her own disciples.

Ladaa is, like approximately 95% of Thais, a Theravada Buddhist and an animist. An important part of her life is the practice of Buddhist meditation, which she started at the age of twelve. At the age of thirty-six --and at the rank of Major-- she began an intensive meditation practice, which lasted about ten years. Essential to the understanding of her astrological predictions is her account of how, during much of this time, she gained meditative powers that allowed her to "read" people just by meeting them. She was so good at this that, at times, a dozen or more people would be waiting to see her and get a reading. She says she can no longer "read" people in this manner, that an astrological natal chart works just as well and provides a more stable base for making predictions. Astrology is said to complement Thai Buddhism in that a person's astrological natal chart is said to represent that person's past karma.⁶

In the past, Thai astrological practice was under the control of the royal state, and the royal astrologers were men; thus, when astrology moved fully into the public realm men brought it there. At present, no accurate statistics are available on the number of astrologers, let alone a breakdown by sex. It is, however, safe to say that the vast majority of astrologers and most diviners are men, with the notable exception of spirit mediums. It is important to note that many Buddhist monks practice divination

⁴ In Thai culture, people are most frequently referred to and spoken to by using the given name [first name] only. This article reflects that cultural convention.

⁵ Ladaa retired in 2004, approximately five years prior to the author's 2009 conference presentation at Cleveland State University.

⁶ Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1991).

and magic arts, and this helps keep the ratio of male to female practitioners high, as women cannot be ordained as nuns in Thai Buddhism.⁷

According to Ladaa, the Thai *sangha* (Buddhist monastic community), as an exclusively male institution, held a strong prejudice against women practicing an art that brought prestige and wealth to monks and monasteries. For Thai laity, Buddhist monks naturally gain a certain “magical” power (*parami*) from the merit acquired from being a monk. Thus, they are considered particularly strong in casting horoscopes and other divinatory or magical practices. In the field of astrology, a woman has to prove her skill without the benefit of this inherent mystical advantage.⁸

Originally, putting an important practice like astrology into the hands of women was considered ridiculous. Women were expected to accept their inferior positions as culturally, biologically, and karmically mandated. Women astrologers breaking into the field had to be perceived as being very accurate in their predictions, otherwise people would simply return to the traditional male practitioners of divination, or to the mostly female spirit mediums.

When asked if being an astrologer had an influence on her gender as other masculine dominated occupations might, Ladaa gave two replies: The first thing she said was, “I am not a woman, my moon is so weak. I can’t say I am a true woman. You see I even joined the army.” She qualified this by saying she is biologically female, of course, but her weak moon lessens her femininity. In Thai astrology, the moon is the most important feminine gender indicator for biological females. A normal or strong moon in a woman gives the general gender qualities (mental and emotional) associated with traditional / stereotypical femininity. According to Ladaa, a weak moon means these feminine qualities will be lacking in individuals who are biologically female, although this suggests nothing about sexual orientation.

Secondly, she stated that being an astrologer is not an occupation; an astrologer is a person with special knowledge. It is something that adds to a person’s regular life and is usually not a career path in itself. In Ladaa’s experience, astrologers normally have a primary career or a supplemental occupation to ensure a steady income; or, like her, they have a pension or other support mechanisms. Because of these factors—and the long hours of study and practice needed to become proficient, she does not encourage women with career and household obligations to become astrologers. Indeed, several women have approached her about becoming her disciples. In the end, however, they could not manage the time to study. That being said, if any individual can become an astrologer, Ladaa thinks it is a very good practice for both women and men.

Ladaa is convinced that there is nothing particularly feminine or masculine about being an astrologer. She feels that an astrologer is like a mentor or counselor and that this sentiment is common among astrologers. Most of the people who seek out an astrologer have some kind of problem in their lives, and they want help to overcome it. As mentors or counselors, astrologers state the problem that is written in the stars and recommend behavioral adjustments, such as meditation and other practical solutions to solve the problem. They also counsel patience in waiting for the position of the stars to change. Thus, a client’s chart will “naturally” improve and, consequently, the problem will be solved. Ladaa herself will, on occasion, console, entertain, and (since she works out of her home) even give out refreshments and sweets to people depending on how upset they might be, whether over their current life circumstances or a prediction. She thinks it is essential to avoid showing fatigue, irritation, or boredom in dealing with clients. For Ladaa, none of this is particularly gender specific.

⁷ Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1991).

⁸ H. G. Quaritch Wales. 1983. *Divination in Thailand: The Hopes and Fears of a South East Asian People* (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1983).

Nevertheless, Ladaa believes that most male astrologers think they are wise men giving out hidden knowledge, and/or they are magic men capable of altering a person's karma and eliminating a client's problems. They claim a person will actually feel better and have a better life after an astrological consultation with them. She did add that some female astrologers would make the same sorts of claims. Neither Ladaa nor her teacher believes they can correct karma, nor do they understand how others might accomplish this. They rely on the above strategies of trying to solve problems by more practical means. She also dislikes the practice of some male astrologers who charge 300 baht or more and impose a 5-question maximum after the initial reading. She feels this is simply too commercial and goes against the idea of being of service to someone in need. Rather than astrology affecting femininity, it seems that female and male astrologers practice within established gender norms and in a manner fitting their personality.

One might ask whether gender influences the actual reading or interpretation of an astrological chart. According to Ladaa, it does. Evidence from my observations also suggests that female and male astrologers will see the same physical position of the stars in the chart, and this stands to reason; but, exactly how these positions are interpreted and which relationships are considered important will vary along gender lines, falling into stereotypically feminine and masculine readings and interpretations.

Male astrologers speaking to male clients, for example, will often congratulate a man, should he have powerful stars linked to high status and personal accomplishments. And when the chart shows it, male astrologers commend a man on his sexual prowess and skills as a womanizer. In other words, they praise masculine "success." A female astrologer will be less inclined to speak directly of sex; she will simply tell a man he is attractive and popular with women. For Ladaa, most Thai women are too shy to talk about sex directly and they usually do not comment overtly on the sexual stars. She feels that the average female astrologer will focus more on the spiritual stars in a chart and less on the sexual ones. The exceptions to the rule are women astrologers with a strong Rahu in their natal charts. Rahu, the villain star of eclipses, makes people bold and thus a female astrologer with a strong Rahu is inclined to discuss sex for the thrill of it.⁹

Ladaa did qualify some of the above by stating that, as with any profession, astrologers come from all walks of life. Depending upon class, education, family upbringing etc., some astrologers might be rude while others are more refined. Ladaa further criticizes male astrologers as they can say almost anything they want, including exaggerating aspects of a chart. On the contrary, female astrologers must think before making predictions. Women must be more careful in general as client criticism of female astrologers is still more frequent and harsh than for male astrologers. In the case of an attractive female client who has strong sexual stars and stars showing multiple relationships (which often includes divorce), male astrologers frequently tell the client that she is attractive and attracted to men, that she is interested in sex and will certainly marry or remarry. In contrast a female astrologer will likely tell a female client not to think too obsessively about men and will make no prediction about marriage or remarriage.

If male and Rahu female astrologers are typically bolder in speaking of sexual matters, how do they deal with negative aspects of a chart? Generally speaking, astrologers tend to accentuate the positive in a chart. Here Ladaa sees commonalities among all astrologers. While men and bold women might be inclined to give a little more bad news, they remain within the general framework of providing more good news than bad. The goal is to be constructive rather than destructive when reading a chart. However, all astrologers must warn a client of severe problems, such as a serious loss of money or a harmful relationship.

⁹ See Singtho Suriyarak. *Thai Astrology: Complete Self-Study Book*, n.d.

Does gender lead to privileging certain clients? In Ladaa's opinion, female astrologers must always be careful with clients. Due to the continuing biases against women in Thai society, female astrologers cannot afford to show bias or privilege in dealing with clients. This is not so for the male astrologers. In Ladaa's observations, the male astrologers definitely privilege attractive female clients. Not only do they privilege them with longer, better, and more praiseworthy readings, they might even try to initiate casual relationships with the single ones. The astrologer has the client's sexual behavior in the chart and can thus decide the best way to go about approaching the woman. In addition, female clients are inclined to trust the astrologer, and thus they may be more open to the astrologer's advances. In the case of a blind reading--that is, the astrologer has the chart but the client is not present, then the male astrologer might voice a need to actually meet a female client with a chart showing physical beauty and strong sexual stars.

Following in this line, male astrologers put more value on the positive sexual and beauty stars of women than do female astrologers. Conservative female astrologers can be wary of or even negative about the strong sexual stars of a pretty and sensual female client, and this is more likely to be the case with blind readings, when the female astrologer need not conceal her negative reaction to such a female client's chart.

If female astrologers practice with a bias against them, do they receive the same respect accorded to male astrologers? For Ladaa, while males might still command a measure of greater respect, a good reputation gained through perceived accuracy in prediction will guarantee respect from clients. Astrologers from the lower classes in Thailand, female and male, can face a lack of respect from the Thai upper classes. Also, like Ladaa, there are astrologers who, because they do not need or perhaps do not want the money, charge a modest fee but practice high quality astrology. However, there is that strange though common phenomenon of a client believing that the higher the price for a consultation the better the quality of the reading. Finally, in Ladaa's case, her clients know that she was an officer in the army, and the military in Thailand is held in high regard, thus she automatically commands a high level of respect from her clients—even from men of her own age group and higher social status.

As a general rule, people in Thailand go to astrologers to solve a current problem, avoid some future problem, and/or to find the auspicious time for holding important events like starting construction on a new building or having a wedding ceremony. In Ladaa's experience, female and male clients alike ask the same basic questions and in the same order of priority. The number one question concerns the related matters of career and money. Both female and male clients want to know if they will get a promotion, a raise, make a big sale, etc. The second reason for a consultation is general problem solving, ranging from social problems of family and friends to material problems of housing and travel. Third on the list are questions of romance, relationships and marriage. But, here women are more inclined to ask about relationships and marriage than men. Single professional women between the ages of 26 and 46 are particularly concerned with finding a husband. Women are also more likely to inquire about the stability of a current relationship, especially as to whether they should end it, including getting a divorce. Rounding out the list of frequently asked questions are those related to health. Thirty years ago when Ladaa started learning to read astrological charts, questions of health were number one on the list. The fact that health is now fourth on the list reflects improvements in the overall health of the Thai population and a major shift in priorities. Thais have fully embraced consumerism, and making money is a constant preoccupation.

Can an astrologer read biological sex from an astrological chart? Ladaa says yes, but one must be careful; in a good number of cases male charts resemble female charts. Thus, in a blind reading the astrologer might mistake a male client for a female client, if a traditionally feminine gender trait, such as a gentle disposition, is prominent in the charts. In Thai astrology, a specifically feminine sign is Virgo, and women born under

this sign are said to be very feminine and more likely than others to be attractive. A male born under this sign will also have more feminine traits. In Thai astrology, two heavily masculine signs are Leo and Libra. When asked whether Leo and Libra women can be physically attractive females, Ladaa said yes but explained that their behavior and emotions will be on the masculine side.

In Ladaa's view, the "interpretation gap" between female and male astrologers is not that great. In her opinion, astrologers are professionals and as such their biases are under some amount of control. However, this preliminary study indicates that classic Thai feminine and masculine gender roles are in full play in Thai astrology, which falls in line with Bernard Sellato's statement "*L'astrologie, d'abord, parle de l'homme et de la société.*" / "Astrology, first, speaks of man and society."¹⁰ Thai female and male astrologers will interpret and explain astrological natal charts in a manner indicative of the astrologer's gender. Female Thai astrologers interpret, react, and explain in Thai feminine ways and Thai male astrologers interpret, react, and explain in Thai masculine ways. Each follows the gender models that are still quite demarcated at every level in Thai society and as contained in the very astrological manuals astrologers use. Colonel Ladaa Gaewkul—though not fitting the traditional gender model of a Thai woman in her career as an army officer, still practices astrology in the manner of a Thai woman. Thus, while the practice of astrology does not affect her femininity, one can argue that her femininity does affect her practice of astrology.

¹⁰ Bernard Sellato, "L'Astrologie: Une Science Humaine," *L'Homme* 31, no. 119 (Juillet-Septembre, 1991): 113-118 Accessed from www.persee.fr.

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